2. Hokkaido International Foundation (HIF)

a. Jacob Earle, Summer 2019 Final Report

Hello future Light Fellows! My name is Jacob Earle, and I participated in the Hokkaido International Foundation (HIF) program in Hakodate, Japan, in the summer of 2019 through the Light Fellowship. In this post I hope to give you a glimpse into my experience as a Light Fellow and as an HIF participant.

Upon receiving the Light Fellowship, I, like you probably were, was ecstatic! I couldn’t believe that my dream of traveling to Japan—which I thought would be prohibitively expensive—was finally on the horizon. I was filled simultaneously with excitement and worry. After all, I would be traveling to the other side of the globe to study abroad in a country whose language I had barely begun studying a year ago. I had done a foreign exchange year in Germany prior to coming to Yale, but the massive cultural differences made this exchange seem much more daunting. Still, any doubts I might have had were far superseded by my desire to go on this amazing journey.

When I was looking at which Light approved programs I should apply to, HIF quickly became my favorite for three reasons. These three aspects of the program that appealed to me the most were the homestay, the almost daily cultural classes, and the independent study project. I will discuss these aspects of the program later on in the post. The admissions decisions for HIF were fairly late in the year, but once I received acceptance to the program, nothing stood between me and Japan but time.

I spent the month home before my exchange spending time with friends and family and doing whatever preparations I could for the exchange. I listened to various podcasts and watched Youtube videos to work on my vocabulary and listening skills (one podcast I recommend is Japanese Pod 101). However, ideally I should have also sought out a pen pal or online tutoring to work on my active language skills. Some apps I have used in the past to find native speakers of other languages are HelloTalk, which pairs you with a penpal with whom you can exchange your language skills, and iTalki, a cheap online tutoring site.

However, the most exciting preparation I made was looking for gifts for my host family. I tried to find objects that represented my home of West Virginia the best and ended up buying a photo book, a jar of WV honey, some WV soap, and a statue of the state animal (a black bear) made from the state mineral (coal). When picking gifts for your own future host family, should you have one, don’t worry too much if you don’t know what exactly their interests are, as, no matter what you purchase, they will appreciate your gratitude.
In early June, my trip to Japan finally began. I drove four hours to the airport, hopped on a plane, and … stood on the tarmac for an hour before having to deplane. Unfortunately, my outbound flight to Japan was canceled and I had to work fast to rebook a flight for the next day so I would make it to my program in time. This inconvenience was somewhat frustrating in the moment, but it taught me a great deal about how to handle stressful travel situations. And I got to take a surprise trip to Hong Kong, so it wasn’t too bad of a deal.

Fortunately, my next flight didn’t have any issues and after 16 hours in the air and a night exploring Hong Kong, I touched down in Sapporo. Here, I spent the next few days exploring the comic-book-esque city. I had booked my lodgings in a capsule hotel, which was the source of my first culture shock. Feeling rather dirty after my long journey, I decided to take a relaxing shower. The only problem was that I wasn’t the only one in the shower. As I opened the door, I was greeted by no less than three other bathers in full view. I was shocked at first, but I quickly regained my composure when I realized that this practice was completely normal in Japan, so, since I was in Japan, it should be normal for me as well. In fact, participating in Japanese bathing culture really can make you a lot more comfortable about your body. I spent the rest of my time in Sapporo wandering through parks and enjoying the unbelievably cheap but delicious bentos you can find in any supermarket or convenience store in Japan.

Soon enough, though, I hopped on a train to start my exchange experience in Hakodate. Arriving at the hotel where we would be staying for the next two days, I met all of the amazing students I would be spending the next two months with. Although the first two days were filled with intense placement tests, we still received a small amount of time to explore the bustling port area of Hakodate. During this free time, I had my first interaction with a local of Hakodate: the gregarious vendor of the best takoyaki I’ve ever had. From my wonderful fellow exchange students to the exciting previews into life in Hakodate, these early experiences made me brim with anticipation for the next two months.

As I said earlier, one of the main reasons I chose to attend HIF was its homestay program, and my host family did not disappoint. I believe living with a host family is an unparalleled way of learning about a foreign culture, as it allows you to instantly become intimately connected to a group of people from another culture, learn about family dynamics in that country, and eat a ton of mouth-watering local dishes.

In terms of my host family, they didn’t only fulfill these expectations. They astronomically surpassed them. My host family consisted of two younger host brothers—one 7 and one 10—who loved to play, a host mom who was a wonderful cook and singer, and a host father who was very funny and an insanely hard worker, teaching me a lot about the life of a Japanese salary man. My host family did everything they could to make me feel like a legitimate member of the family, including taking me to the beach, camping, and to various landmarks in Hakodate, as well as introducing me to their parents, relatives, and best friends. And when I met them at the opening ceremony, they immediately went to give me a hug. I got to share my culture with them through cooking tacos and Chicken Alfredo and learned how to make gyooza.
(Japanese dumplings) and seaweed rolls in the process. I truly could not have imagined a better host family and cannot wait to see them again.

After spending the first weekend with my host family, I began taking Japanese classes at the HIF headquarters. At HIF, classes are divided into 6 levels, from A to F. I was placed in level C along with all the other Yale students. The course was very rigorous, with three hours of class per day accompanied by around three hours of homework. We had tests at the end of each midterm and semester as well as kanji quizzes almost every day. Still, despite the course being so rigorous, our teacher was so kind, funny, and supportive, so I improved my Japanese a great deal and enjoyed class in the process. My favorite assignments included the speech contest and the class talent show acts.

Another major selling point of HIF is the cultural classes. HIF seems to be very intimately connected with the residents of Hakodate, so they are able to arrange many fun activities. Some of the highlights for me included judo, a tea ceremony at a high school, televised soba and mochi making, and an interview with the mayor of Hakodate. My favorite class, though, was the historical showcase, where we were able to dance, act, and sing for an audience about the rich history of Hakodate. These courses gave me a chance to explore Japanese culture without needing to commit too much time, and I certainly couldn’t have planned all of these on my own in one trip.

There are two other positive aspects of the program I’d like to mention briefly. The first is the IS project, which gives participants a chance to forge language skills in a topic of their interest. There were tons of interesting projects that my fellow students did. Some examples were learning kendo, interviewing local experts and host families on various topics, historical research, and making Hakodate-inspired paper art. My topic was “The Fish of Hakodate.” In my “research,” I got to learn about the importance of fish for the Hakodate economy while eating tons of delicious seafood, interviewing a squid fisherman, and even going fishing on my own. If you do choose to do HIF, just be aware that the IS topic proposal deadline is within the first few days of the program, so have some ideas before you come. The second positive aspect was the special lectures, of which there were three during our program. The first was a presentation from a master comedian and paper cutter, the second was a talk on the use of virtual reality in language learning, and the final one analyzed aspects of the Japanese language as a metaphor or Japanese culture. These lectures were truly amazing and provided me with many interesting things to think about as I went through my exchange.

Many of the best memories I have from my summer were made with the friends that I met through doing HIF. The size of students attending HIF is small enough to allow almost all of the students to become friends with each other. Additionally, the small class setting foster close connections, and host families are often very close to each other, so the exchange students were all close enough to meet up often. Many of those students were from the Northeast, including some Harvard students I will see at the Harvard-Yale game. We spent our free time visiting Hakodate’s landmarks, eating at restaurants, and just enjoying the Japanese lifestyle.
If you do choose to attend HIF, some must-see attractions in Hakodate include the Asaichi seafood market, the star-shaped Goryokaku park, the delectable hamburger shop Lucky Pierrot, the Squid Dance at the Port Festival, and, of course, Mount Hakodate.

There are some factors you should definitely consider when deciding if HIF is the right program for you. For example, Hakodate is smaller than a lot of the other Light-approved program cities, so there may not be as many attractions as in cities like Tokyo or Osaka. Also, you are only able to travel over the four-day semester break, not during the weekends, although you could still travel Japan after or before the program. In reality, I believe these minor drawbacks are really just a consequence of how deep a connection you will make with Hakodate during your stay.

In the end, you will have your own preferences and goals that determine which program will be the best for you, but I hope this post has brought you to at least consider HIF for your study with the Light Fellowship. I am very thankful that I did, and I have learned so much this summer. Whichever program you choose, though, I know you will have an excellent time!

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b. Kamau Walker, Summer 2018 Final Report

最初（THE BEGINNING）

While stepping into the Miami International Airport, I realized something. "This is the biggest step I have ever taken in my life." This was my journal entry that sums everything up pretty well. "I'm scared I'll mess up, and know I will. I'm scared me and my host family won't get along. And I'm terrified I'll love them immensely and it will hurt to say goodbye. I'm nervous about my Japanese and my commitment to stay an extra two weeks. I've decided to do something related to poetry and art, and I'm scared I'll love it so much that I go back to school and completely change majors. I'm scared I won't love it and decide not to pursue it as a passion of mine anymore. In short I'm scared of how different I may be after this, or how similar. And the truth is I'm excited for some of those very reasons. The entire plane ride it felt like this wasn't real, like the program never actually happened. Yet here I am in Tokyo, preparing to face my fears, with no choice but to charge forward now."

LOCATION

Hakodate is very much the type of city I could see myself living in. Simply walking the streets was a pleasant experience. So much so that I rarely took the tram, despite public transportation being amazing in Japan, even when my stop was an hour and a half walk away. Most people have a decently long commute to the program but my house was actually the closest (only two minutes away from our classes). Thus, I also had the option to walk more, and thoroughly enjoyed it.
Hakodate is quite large spatially, but is certainly not your New York, Tokyo, or Kyoto. But that's also why I chose to go there. There are plenty of things to do however, although naturally not as much as in the cities mentioned before hand. The people were fairly nice on the whole, and scenically, it is probably the most beautiful city I have ever been in.

**CLASSES**

Honestly, they were so so. The first semester was like 50% review because this program and Yale's curriculum don't match well. My sensei was fine but also not the best type of teacher for me to learn I think. Thus there was the problem with the placement test. The placement test, at least for those who just finished their first year is quite difficult. I don't mean simply being challenging, but rather, the results are hard to transfer over into which class you should be in. Both A and B gumi, the two least advanced classes use Genki 2 for at least one semester. Thus, the placement test operates essentially under the assumption that anyone in these levels would have used Genki as well. Coming from Yale, given the different structural order of classes we learn things in differently, so our knowledge may be roughly the same in quantity but is different from the knowledge of genki students. Thus starting in B gumi and starting with the second half of Genki, there was a lot of review, whereas much of the material I had never encountered was in the first half of Genki. This meant that during our review portion, I essentially had to memorize 20 kanji a night for the first four days. There is a merit to reviewing what you concepts you've already learned and re-cementing them, but I say you should make the decision as to if you desire to do so, or, as I probably would have preferred to do, would rather study by yourself and play catch up in c gumi instead.

So, if you do decide to opt for c-gumi, this is what I would suggest. Use quizlet or some other service and search genki 2 kanji. Learning these kanji we may not have, and also the grammar points given in the Japanese light fellow guide to brush up on should allow for that. Also, naturally, any speaking practice you can get will certainly be helpful.

As for NDR (HIF's Japanese only rule): I personally found this very helpful in developing my speaking skills. It forces you to be creative in how you approach conversations regarding topics you don't know the vocabulary for. For example, the program director and I had a 2 hour conversation about my lizard research because he was interested, but I knew virtually none of the vocabulary necessary for that conversation. Thus I think NDR forces you to tackle those situations head on. That said, your commitment to NDR will determine how helpful it is to you. It is not impossible to speak English when the sensei are not in ear shot, or whisper in class, etc. And undoubtedly some of your classmates will speak so to you. Especially toward the end of the program people tend to care less and less about it. However, I made it a point to stick to the rule no matter what, and think that my speaking skills have drastically improved because of this. This can even express itself in you not just asking for the Japanese translation of a word, but rather attempting to describe the word in Japanese as well.
MY INDEPENDENT STUDY
So I decided to try my hand at 書道 (shodou/Japanese calligraphy) and honestly it was freakin awesome and I still plan to continue it when I get back. The art itself is very interesting to me, but my sensei were the real highlights. Every Sunday for 6 weeks we would meet each other. And after lessons, we would spend about an hour or so just talking in Japanese with each other about whatever the subject may be. They were both incredibly kind people. They bought my heart with snacks, conversation, and overall amazingness. They even both came to see me off at the train station. And as soon as my train car was no longer in their eyesight I began to silently cry my eyes out in a crowded train car. You can really do whatever you want with your independent study, from trying various soft cream flavors, to pottery, to music translation. Ultimately, choose something that you will be excited about, not just something that seems it may be easy. I would personally suggest choosing something in which you work with someone in Hakodate simply because it is a unique way to get to know someone, and you have the opportunity to learn from someone for free while also practicing your Japanese and building a great connection.

THOSE I CAME TO LOVE
I met a lot of awesome people. Some of which turned out to be in the same school as us, yet our paths never really crossed. And spending time with them was honestly just so fun, or enlightening. But like in the way that a kid can experience the world coated in magic, thinking everything endless and beautiful. And it was that combination of child mindedness and growth that made them so awesome. Some of my favorite days were the ones I walked into a random bar and just talked with the owners, and so many random encounters with Japanese people on the street have lead to great experiences ranging from 1 minute long to 4 hours. I also got fairly close to one Japanese Student named Hibiki, who is truly a kind soul, and even with me only knowing some Japanese, him some English, we've had great talks, and walks together just exploring the city. And then, during my trip after Japan, we both met in Tokyo to spend a day together.

RANDOM
Nothing that I write will ever convey to you what it is to join thousands of people in a city and dance like a squid in the middle of the street until you have experienced it yourself, especially with your friend's hilariously drunk host mother.

MY HOST FAMILY
The only thing I can say is I was right to be afraid. I really came to love them. They were just a household that was defined by love. And I could feel that even when I was just upstairs in the room doing my homework, listening downstairs. Not to say they were perfect, or didn't have their disagreements, but they definitely loved each other. So much so that I felt like I was back in Saint Louis with my family in some ways. My host dad's since of style was on point. I taught my
host mom what sarcasm was and her using it on me was one of the best things in all of Japan. Mifune is the soul reason I had to start doing my homework at school, and then all but gave up on it all together just to spend more time playing with her. Maho is a great, kind-hearted, and responsible big sister, and Kotoha proved to me that I actually can like babies. We went from always waving to each other at dinner, to me getting to see her first steps, and then those first steps running to play with me. Furthermore, both my host father and mother were some BOMB cooks.

**SPEAKING OF FOOD**

It's nearly impossible to be a vegetarian and eat out, so that was difficult. Thus I also added shrimp and fish to the diet. 7-11 in Japan is a god send, or the devil in disguise. You can get your meals for so like 3.50 and eat well, and go to the atm. Frequent stops of mine. There is a dining hall in the class building where you can get meals for 300-500 yen every weekday, but I typically took the 5 minute walk to the nearby supermarket where you could also get decent food for similar prices. SOFT CREAM IS DELICIOUS. And there is a backstreet with 3 different soft cream places right behind HIF.

**CONCLUSION**

Ultimately this program is not for everyone. If you want a more dense living area with a vibrant nightlife, or other attractions, you should go somewhere else. Furthermore, if you are first and foremost concerned with being as well prepared to return to Japanese L5 program as possible, choose a different program. But, if you want to live in a wonderful more quiet city with people who seem legitimately happy to talk and learn from you, and have an amazing experience, I can't recommend Hakodate enough. My host family, and IS sensei were irreplaceable, and I couldn't imagine being nearly as happy anywhere else. I'm sure the other programs are great on their own terms, but Hakodate really seemed right for me, if not the best academically, the experiences I had certainly made up for it. I actually took a trip afterwards to Kyoto for 6 days and Tokyo for 5, and though those trips were quite fun, I realized something. I would much rather live in Hakodate for 2 months. The other places felt great to travel to, but didn't feel the same just walking around and existing in the space.

Speaking of which, if you are able to, in all senses of the word (financially, time, physical capacity, etc.) I would recommend taking a trip after the program. It's a great way to test the Japanese you've learned and also have a fun time in Japan without having to buy two additional plane tickets. And if you want any tips on that, or anything else I've said, feel free to contact me. kamau.walker@yale.edu.
Roba Sawabi, Summer 2019 Final Report

HIF is a very thorough program, in many senses of the word. I would recommend it for a student who wants to experience a wide range of elements of Japanese culture, but can also handle a packed schedule.

The academics were definitely thorough, to begin, as we covered all the skill sets including listening, reading, writing and speaking in the classroom. The teachers were helpful, and work hard to explain and teach to the best of their ability, upholding the Japanese-only rule and creating the desired immersive environment. They also try to be involved in students’ lives as much as possible, taking notes on students’ progress and achievements in their file. The staff are wonderful, and will help in any way that they can to make sure students are enjoying their time in the program and have everything they need. The teachers and staff make it very possible for students to open up to them about anything, and I found this helpful to the degree that I was touched and shocked by their efforts at times. There is a lot of homework (a few hours worth at least, every day), and about three hours of class everyday, with added responsibilities like daily reports and board duty (日直), special lectures to attend, a speech students must write and memorize for the speech contest, and the Independent Study Project, to be presented at the Independent Study Fair, among other things. These can all be fun, but do take a considerable amount of work and time aside from class time and homework, so they are factors to consider and be aware of.

There are cultural classes each week that can be signed up for, including events like trying on a kimono, participating in a traditional tea ceremony, Japanese martial arts classes, visiting an elementary school and care house and a range of museums, making traditional Japanese sweets, traditional Japanese flower arrangement, etc. In this way, students can meet the townspeople while experiencing bits and pieces of Japanese culture. Also available is a Japanese Language table, an hour where student volunteers of the local university come to HIF to interact with the HIF students, held about every other week, schedule varying depending on the volunteers’ schedules. During that time students play games or review for tests or just chat freely with the volunteers. It is a good opportunity to try to make friends with Japanese students of similar ages.

So with these events plus class and homework, the days are full, and that is beside the fact that Hakodate is a town worth exploring. Though a small, quaint town all in all, there are many world-famous foods to try and beautiful places to see, though merely the daily commute to school boasts its own remarkable sights as well, for as you pass mountains and sea views and artlike streets brimming with flowers and trees, you will more than likely stop to stare once in a while, no matter how late you are.

In addition, spending time with the host family is a major part of the program. Even if you do not intend it to be, the program is definitely structured with this intention, and with their
own charm the host families manage to become a huge part of your life during your stay, as well as a huge part of the memories you will cherish after graduating from the program.

Students stay with a host family for the entire term, spending the night away only during semester break and the overnight class trip. This is part of the immersive Japanese environment the program provides students with, but more than that, as I found myself, this part of the program becomes the student’s moral support system, and the way to be able to handle everything else. There is a lot of structure in the program, so it is easy to get tired if you do not take good care of yourself, but the host family will make sure they do everything they can to make sure you are taken care of, to the best of their ability. The extent of their kindness and generosity will surprise you, and the HIF staff take the host family form that the students fill out as part of their application very seriously. As such, it is important that the student takes it seriously as well, because every word is read carefully and if something needs clarification you will be contacted by the staff, to make sure you are matched with the most suitable family and are placed in a situation in which you are comfortable. For the most part, they are very successful. And as with everything else, students are encouraged to come to the staff if there are any issues at all.

My host family was mainly my host mother, because my host father was a brain surgeon who happened to be away for work for a lot of the time that I was there. They have two children, college students near my age who live away from home and so were not technically meant as part of my homestay experience, but even so I kept in contact with my younger host brother, who like my host parents became a very kind and helpful friend to me during my stay. I found myself wanting to spend any free time I had, if any, with my host family, which I realized was a pleasant surprise because I had been worried about what kind of host family experience I would have before doing this program since I had never done anything like it before. I am very different culturally, but even then my family was extremely accommodating and were always curious and earnest to learn about my culture and lifestyle, while at the same time sharing theirs, making it an extremely special experience for all of us. “I just want you to be happy here, tell me what I can do to help you”, is the quote I would use to best capture the host family attitude of this program.

For me personally, I felt I was able to experience a variety of fun and fascinating facets of Japanese culture, though I did feel overwhelmed at times with the full schedules. In the end, it did feel worth it, because I do think there was no way I would have been able to experience these things otherwise. Indeed, before doing this program I never even imagined I would be able to try things like wear a kimono, see a fireworks festival, witness a high school judo team practice, form strong bonds with my host family, or see and experience some of the most famous attractions of Japan in the small town of Hakodate. For this I am grateful.

I came to Japan with as open a mentality as I thought I could have, and yet was still surprised by what I learned living in a Japanese household, trying different culture classes and interacting with Japanese friends. A goal in particular that I had of forming special bonds with people was actually a priority of mine going to Japan, as I have studied abroad previously and
have learned exactly how special such relationships can be, for my personal growth as well as linguistic and cultural knowledge, and is just quite simply the most fun you can have during a study abroad term. I wanted to make relationships that would last a lifetime, and I think I had subconscious expectations that this experience would be similar to my last, when in fact it was not; in other words, it was not an easy journey for me. Thus, I was reminded afresh of the reality of cultural differences, no matter how open-minded I felt I was. I had to do my best to not feel discouraged, because in the end I did feel like I succeeded in making friends with other students after a while, because they also wanted to connect with foreign students, and cultural exchange became windows to youth culture as well as simply fun friendships.

It did feel sad to leave the friends I made in my host family, Japanese volunteer students, and fellow HIF students, but still being able to stay in touch with them not only helps me practice Japanese and keep my studies fresh, but also gives me reason to continue. This is what I felt as the most important and special part of my time abroad, for my growth both as a student and as a person on the whole. Reflecting on my time in this program, these are the experiences that stand out the most in my memory, and I think that overall, applying students should keep in mind that grammar can be studied in any classroom, but the real treasures of study abroad can be found in the people that you meet there, and truly therein, lives the language.